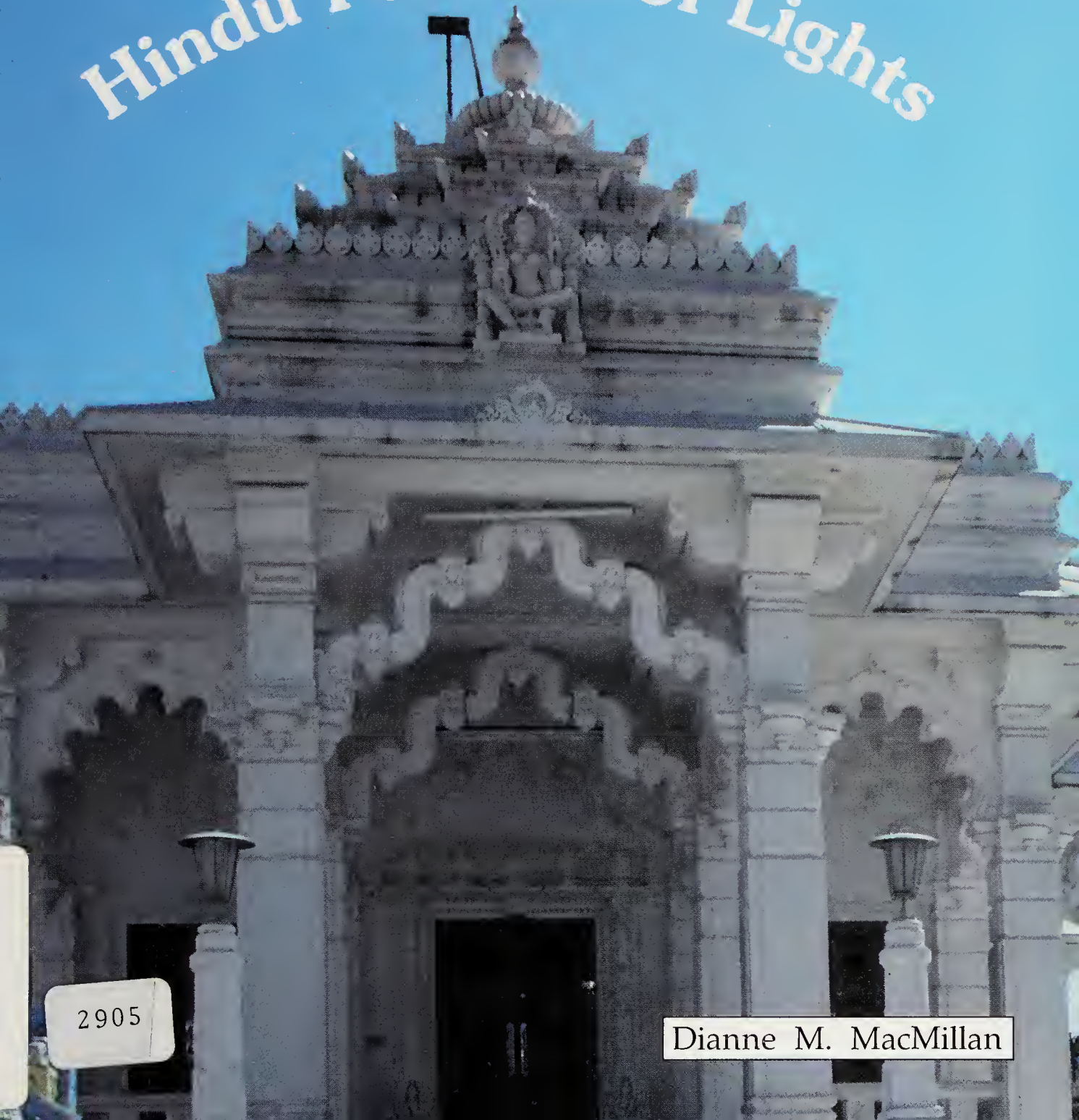
Diwali

Hindu Festival of Lights



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Hindu Festival of Lights

Dianne M. MacMillan

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To Padmini and Prashant

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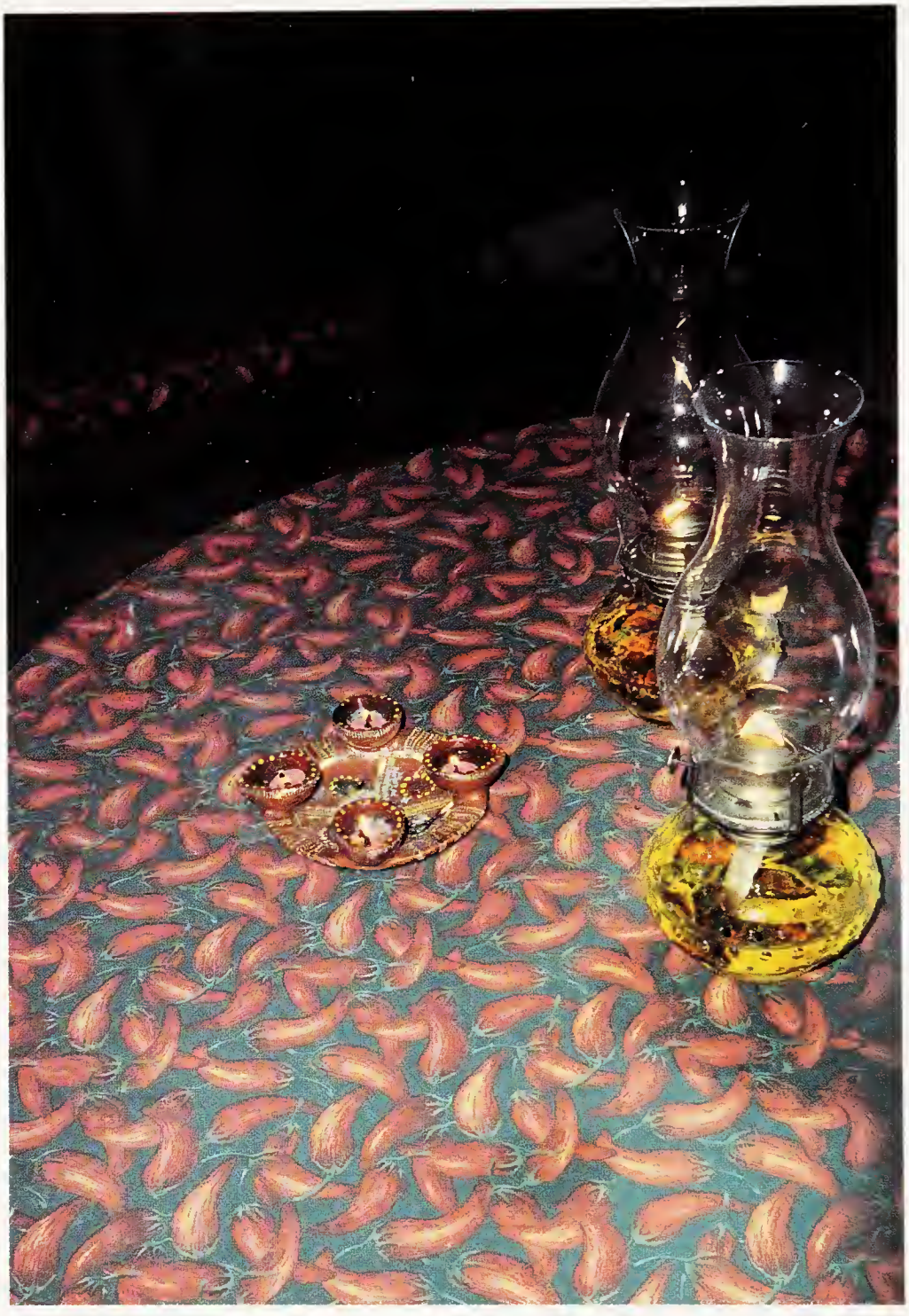


Small clay oil lamps and lanterns are lit for Diwali.

Hundreds of Lights

As the sun goes down, in many homes in the United States and Canada a mother lights tiny clay oil lamps outside her home. These tiny oil lamps are called dipa (DEE-pa). Children follow behind their mother. As each new point of light glows brightly on walls and window ledges, the children smile. Soon rows of lights are seen everywhere. Every light in the house is turned on. The darkness of the night is pushed away. Good feelings fill the night air.

After eating a delicious meal, everyone goes outside. If the family lives in a city that allows fireworks, small firecrackers and sparklers are

set off amid shouts of laughter. Even if fireworks are not allowed, the family can still admire the dozens of burning lights.

These Indian-American families are celebrating a Hindu holiday that began thousands of years ago in the country of India. It is called Diwali (DIWAA-lee). Diwali takes place in the month of October or November. It is one of the most joyous holidays of the year. It is also called Festival of Lights. Festival is another word for holiday or celebration. Let's find out more about this special day.

Hinduism

The major religion in India is Hinduism. People who follow this religion are called Hindus. Hinduism is one of the oldest of the world's religions. No one knows how the religion started.

Many Indian Americans and Indian Canadians were born in the country of India. If you look on a globe of the world, the country of India is directly opposite the United States on the other side of the world. India is one third the size of the United States. It is bordered by the countries of Nepal, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Bhutan, Burma, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

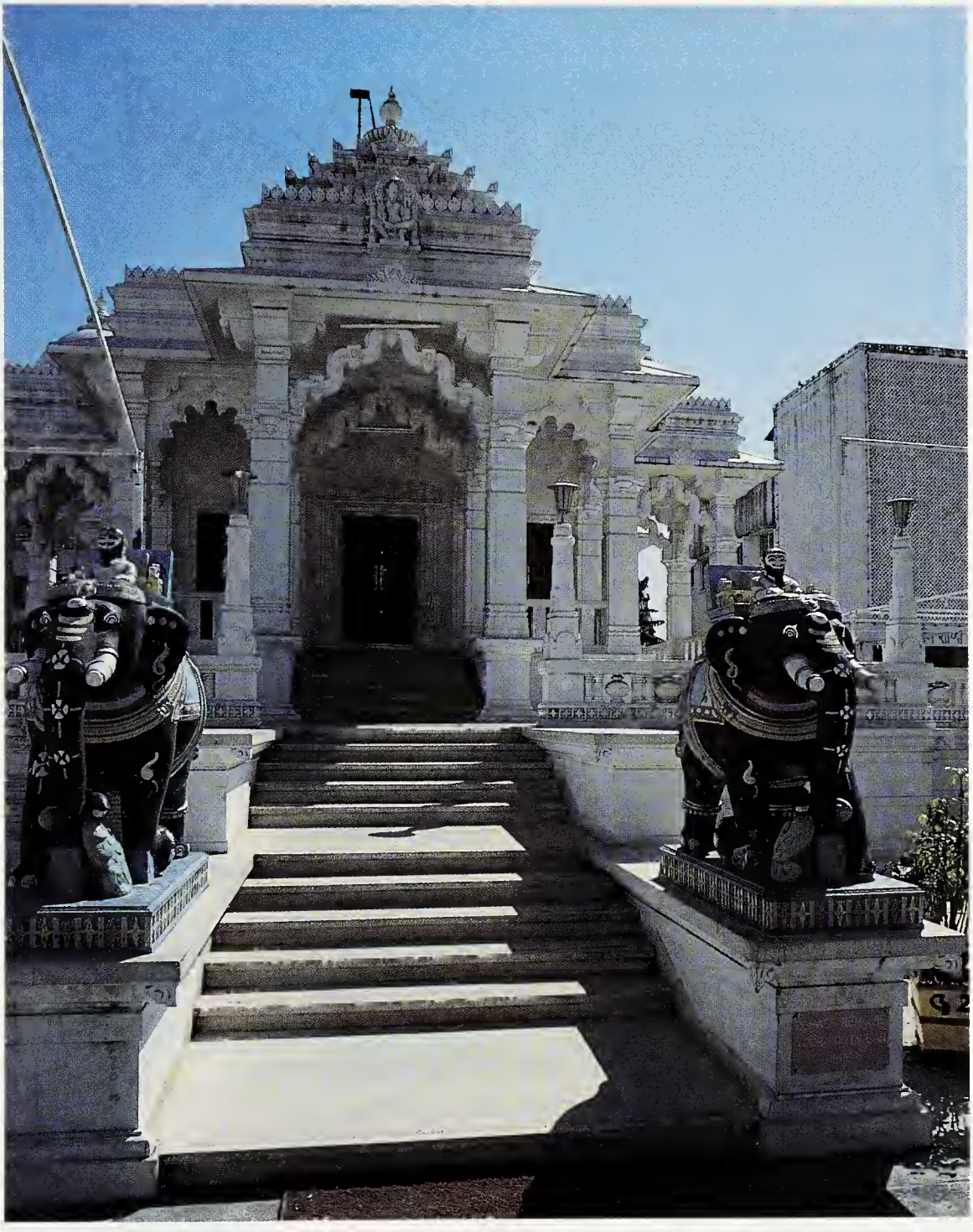
Sacred writings of Hinduism are contained in

four sacred books called the Vedas (VE-das). Veda means knowledge. In the same way that Christians and Jews have the Bible and Muslims have the Koran, Hindus read the Vedas. The Vedas contain stories about creation, prayers, and the proper way for a person to live his or her life.

Hindus believe that when a person dies, his or her soul will be reborn as something or someone else. This rebirth is called reincarnation. Karma is a word that means deeds or actions. Hindus believe that good deeds or karma in this life will bring a better birth in the next life. The purpose of each life is to improve oneself until all evil and earthly desires are overcome.

Another belief of Hinduism is that god is in everything: in trees, rivers, and cows. Cows are sacred, so Hindus do not eat beef. The milk from cows is a symbol of life. A symbol stands for an idea or thing. Milk is used in many Indian foods. It is also used in ceremonies. A ceremony is a set of actions done the same way every time.

Hindus do not have a holy day in the week as do Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Some families



Some families visit a Hindu temple daily.

visit a Hindu temple daily. Others seldom go. Each Hindu worships in his or her own way.

Most families have statues or idols of their favorite gods and goddesses in their homes. Many also have a small altar. The altar is where they pray and worship. They offer food to their gods and goddesses in ceremonies.

A Hindu worship and prayer ceremony is called a puja (POO-jaa). A festival for a god or goddess would include a puja in honor of that god. Pujas have special prayers and chants.

Hinduism is a way of life as well as a religion. It suggests right ways for people to live. Hindus believe in one Supreme Being called Brahman (BRA-hman). This one Supreme Being has three parts. Brahma (BRA-hma) is the Creator. Shiva (SHI-va) is the Destroyer. Vishnu (VI-shnoo) is the Preserver. Vishnu has a kindly nature and Hindus believe he maintains the universe.

Hindus believe that when the world is in danger Vishnu takes the form of a human or animal and comes to earth to save it. The human form of a god is called an avatar (AVATAA-r).

These statues of Hindu gods are carved on a temple.

Many families have a small altar where they pray and worship.

There are many stories about the avatars. Hindus believe that Vishnu has taken the form of an avatar nine times. The two most popular avatars are Rama (RAA-ma) and Krishna (KRI-shna). Stories and legends about these gods give people an example of how to live their lives the right way. Diwali is a celebration of these examples.

The Story of Rama

Long ago a king who ruled in northern India had three wives. He also had four sons: Rama, Lakshman (LA-kshman), Bharat (BHAA-rat), and Shatrugan (SHA-trughan).

Rama was brave and handsome and good with a bow and arrow. The people of the kingdom loved him. Rama always tried to do good deeds. He was a good son and brother. When he grew up he married Sita (SEE-taa) and became a good husband.

The king wanted to make Rama the next king. One of the king's wives objected. She wanted her

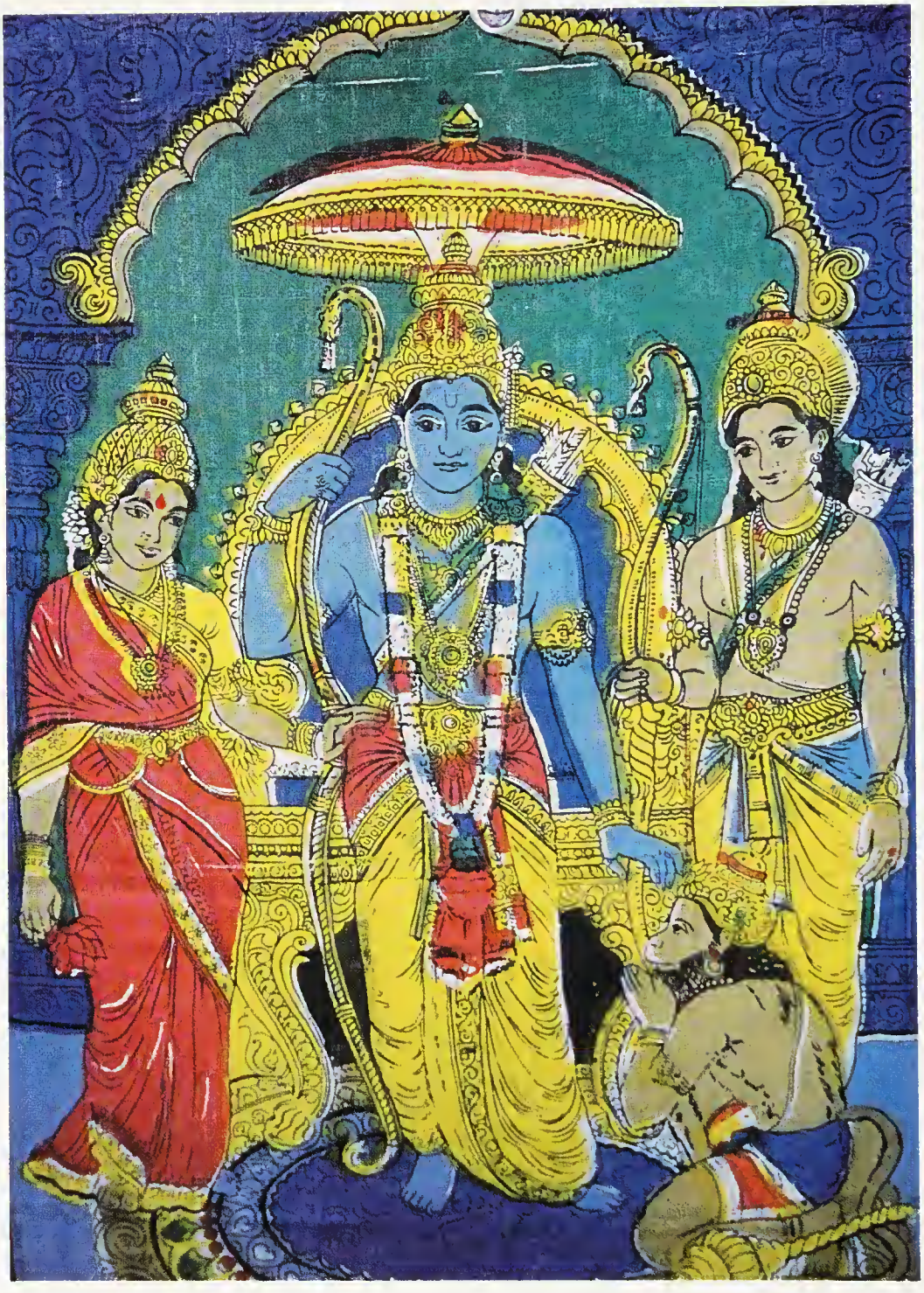
son, Bharat, to be the next king. She also asked the king to send Rama away or exile him.

Earlier, the king had promised to give this wife two wishes. Even though the king was heartsick, he had to honor his word. He exiled Rama from his kingdom for fourteen years.

Rama quietly obeyed his father. He left with Sita and his brother Lakshman. They wandered in the thick jungles for many years, living off berries, nuts, and small animals that Rama and Lakshman hunted. Often they fought with wild animals and evil spirits or demons. But Rama always won.

When they reached the southern tip of India, the ten-headed demon king of the island Lanka (Sri Lanka) decided to steal Sita away. He waited until Rama and Lakshman were away hunting. Then he grabbed Sita and flew away to his palace.

Rama was heartbroken. He and his brother searched everywhere for Sita. Then Hanuman (HANUMAA-n), a god in the form of a monkey, agreed to help him. This monkey god could fly



This wall hanging shows Rama surrounded by Sita, Lakshman, and Hanuman.

like a bird. Hanuman flew across the ocean and found Sita sitting in the demon king's garden. He dropped Rama's ring into Sita's lap and told her that help was on the way.

All of the animals of the jungle helped Rama and Lakshman build a bridge across the ocean to Lanka. Then Rama went across, killed the demon king, and rescued Sita.

The fourteen years of exile were over. Rama, Sita, and Lakshman returned home. The night of Rama's return was on the new moon. The joyous people lit lamps to guide him home. This is one of the reasons that Indian people celebrate Diwali as the festival of lights.

The Story of Krishna

The stories about Krishna are also one of the best-loved tales of Diwali. Krishna was the eighth avatar of Vishnu. Krishna had superhuman strength. When Krishna grew up, he became a great ruler. He took part in a war against the forces of evil.

Krishna's defeat of the evil Narakasura (nara-KAA-sura) is always told on Diwali. With his armies Narakasura captured thousands of young maidens and elephants. He rode into villages and stole gold and treasure.

One day he stole the earrings of the mother of

the gods. Krishna was asked to help fight Narakasura.

Krishna climbed on his large bird, Garuda (ga-ROO-da). The Garuda is a mythical creature that is half man and half eagle. Krishna flew to Narakasura's palace. He took with him his weapons: a mace (a heavy metal club), bows and arrows, a gold discus (a round disk), and a conch shell.

The Garuda is a mythical creature that is half man and half eagle.

The palace was guarded by mountains, weapons, water, fire, and wind. There was also a fearsome five-headed guard named Mura (MOO-ra). As they neared the palace the mountains blocked their way. With a mighty swing of his mace, Krishna shattered the mountains.

Immediately swords, spears, clubs, and other weapons flew through the air toward him. Using his bow and arrows, Krishna destroyed each weapon before any could reach him.

Next a huge wave of water tried to drown him.

These children perform the story of Krishna's defeat of Narakasura.

Krishna threw his discus at the huge wave. As the discus entered the water, the huge wave turned into gentle rain.

But the rain was dried up by scorching fire. Flames surrounded Krishna on all sides. Strong winds fed the fire. Once more Krishna threw his discus. The whirling discus put out the fire and tamed the winds. Finally Krishna reached the palace. He blew into his conch shell.

The noise woke Mura, the five-headed guard. Mura rushed to attack Krishna. Krishna again threw his discus. The edge of the discus cut off all five of Mura's heads. On seeing this, Narakasura was filled with rage. He climbed on his elephant and charged toward Krishna. Narakasura heard a whirring noise. He looked up and saw the discus coming toward him. In the next second the discus struck. The evil Narakasura was dead.

Krishna returned all the treasure, elephants, and young maidens that Narakasura had stolen. He also returned the earrings.

Rama and Krishna are both symbols of goodness.

How Diwali Began

The word Diwali means "row of lights." No one knows for sure when the first Diwali was celebrated. The holiday is probably as old as the Hindu religion.

Each year the stories of Rama and Krishna are told again and again. Actors and dancers act out each story. Children love to play the parts of Rama and Krishna. They put on shows for their parents and friends.

Lakshmi (LA-kshmee), the goddess of good fortune and wealth, has come to symbolize Diwali for most Hindus. They believe Lakshmi blesses homes and businesses on Diwali. People

light lamps so Lakshmi can find their homes. Diwali, the festival of lights, celebrates the victory of good deeds over evil ones. The festival of lights shines bright for all these reasons.

Lakshmi is the goddess of good fortune and wealth.

Getting Ready for Diwali

Indians follow a lunar calendar. Each month begins with the new moon and lasts until the next new moon. The month is twenty-nine and a half days long. Diwali falls in the Indian month of Kartika (KAA-rtika). In India the Diwali festival may last for three days or more, but Hindus in the United States and Canada celebrate for one day.

Weeks before Diwali, families start getting ready. Houses are cleaned from top to bottom. Many believe that Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune and wealth, travels the land on Diwali looking into every home. If a home is not clean

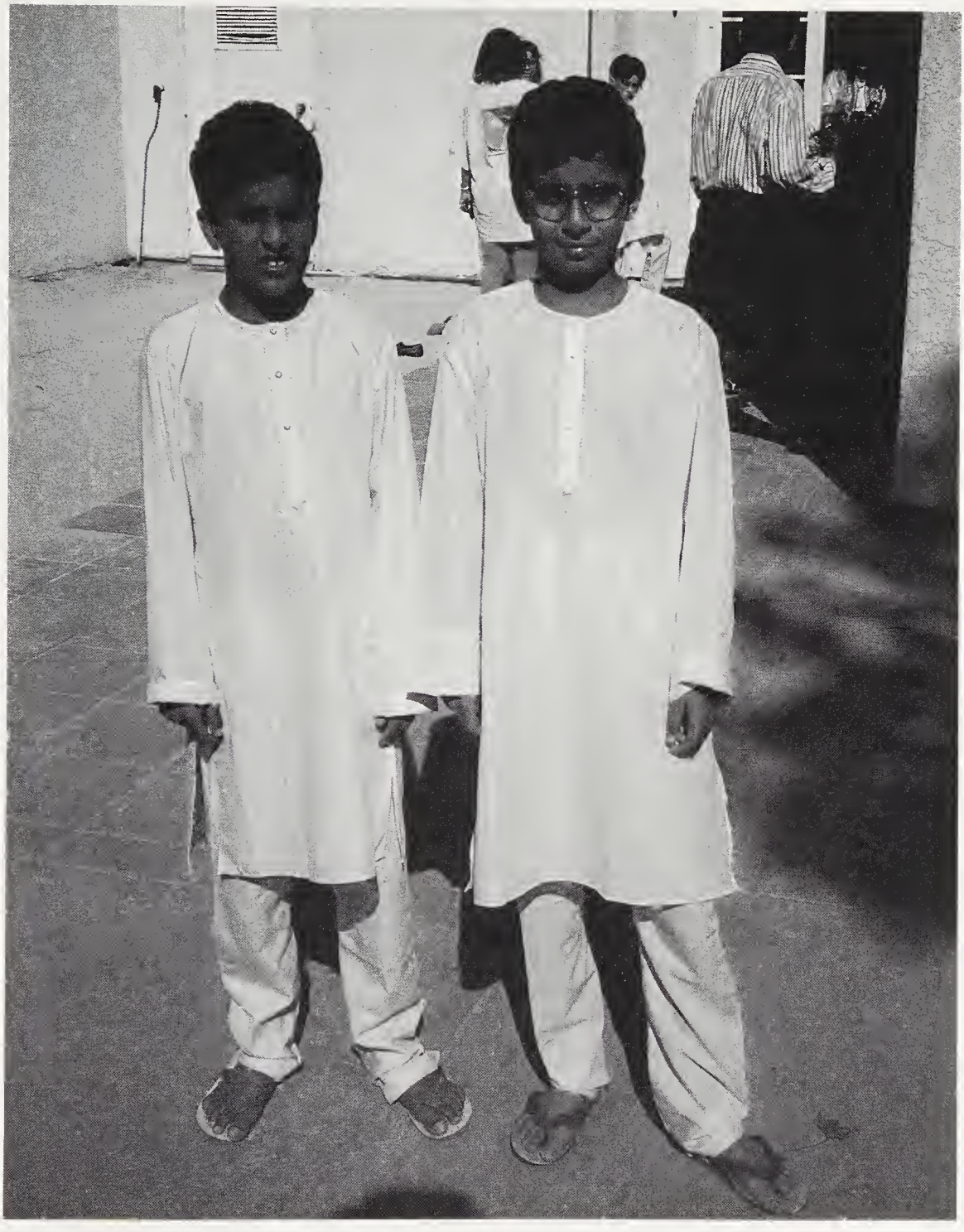
and if clothes are not washed, then Lakshmi will not bring good fortune to the family.

If a family can afford it, they will buy new clothes for everyone. Women and girls wear traditional dresses called saris (SAA-rees). A sari is made from yards of material wrapped around the woman's body. Sometimes the end of it goes over her head to make a covering. Other times women wear loose pants with a long tunic-style dress.

Indian stores carry bolts and bolts of silk and cotton material. Indians love color. The brighter and more colorful the better. A sari worn for Diwali is extra fancy. It might have beads and sequins and special stitches with gold thread called embroidery.

On Diwali some men and boys wear a traditional Indian top called a kurta (KOO-rta) and loose cotton pants. Others wear their regular clothes.

Gold jewelry is also a part of Diwali. The weeks and days before Diwali are busy times for jewelry stores. Shoppers crowd into the stores.



Many boys wear traditional kurtas and loose cotton pants on Diwali.

These women are dressed in special saris and gold jewelry.

Gold necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and hair clips are displayed. Buyers wait until Diwali to put on their new gold jewelry. On the day of Diwali they may make an offering of the jewelry to Lakshmi before wearing it.

Diwali is also a holiday of mouth-watering treats. These sweets are given to guests or eaten by family members. It is not unusual to have twelve or more different kinds to serve. Baking

Bakeries are filled with many desserts and sweets for Diwali.

all the sweets is a lot of work. Many people prefer to buy desserts rather than make them.

Indian bakeries sell many kinds of traditional Diwali desserts. Barfi (BA-rfee), made from sugar and milk, is often cut into square or diamond shapes. Laddoos (LA-ddoos) are sweet, yellow balls of candy. Cham chams (CHA-mchams) are filled with a cheese mixture. Jalebis (JALE-bees) look like pretzels. They are made from flour, fried in butter, and coated with sugar. Rasgulla (RASGU-llaa) are cheese balls dipped in sugar syrup. Everything is delicious. It is hard for children to wait for Diwali.

Community Celebrations

Diwali brings Indian families together. Many times there are events the weekend before or after Diwali. Indian singers and dancers perform. Indian music has its own sound. There are many special instruments like the sitar (SITAA-r), a long-stringed instrument plucked like a guitar, a sarod (SARO-d), a twenty-five-string instrument, and tablas (TA-blaas), which are drums similar to bongos.

Indian dancers wear beautiful costumes. On their ankles they wear rows and rows of tiny bells. As they move, one can hear the tinkling sounds. Many dances tell stories of Hindu gods

Many Indians send greeting cards wishing their friends a Happy Diwali.

and heroes. Some men perform special Indian dances.

Some Indians also like to send Diwali cards. The cards have pictures of clay lamps or the goddess Lakshmi. Lakshmi is usually seen seated on the petals of a lotus flower. She wears gold jewelry and gold coins fall from one of her hands. The words inside the cards wish everyone a year of good fortune.

These children are waiting for a special Diwali performance to begin.

Sometimes Diwali parties are given for the children by community groups. Children play a game called "Pin the Flame on the Dipa."

It is played just like "Pin the Tail on the Donkey." Instead of a donkey's tail, blindfolded boys and girls have a picture of a flame. They try to stick it on a picture of a dipa, the clay oil lamp.

Indian restaurants are filled with customers eating good Indian food. Indian cooking uses many kinds of spices. There are many kinds of curries. A curry is any dish that has a gravy and is flavored with spices. Indians also like to eat rice. Flatbreads made of wheat are eaten with most meals. Pieces of bread are used to pick up the curries and to dip in sauces.

Diwali Arrives

Diwali is celebrated in many different ways. Many Indians will perform a puja in honor of Lakshmi. Some families get up very early, before the sun rises. Quietly, they gather before their home altar and begin their puja ceremony. After the puja the family eats a big meal with many traditional foods. If Diwali occurs on the weekend, the rest of the day is filled with visiting friends and celebrating.

Some girls spend the day decorating the outside entrance floor of their homes with colored powder. Rice flour is used to make special designs called rangoli (RANGO-lee).

Yellow, red, green, and blue colors are added. The designs of birds and flowers are made by joining together dots. Sometimes girls add words that say, "Welcome" or "Happy Diwali." Everyone entering the house will walk by the rangoli. The girls hope the beautiful designs will also welcome Lakshmi.

Girls make beautiful designs called rangoli on their front steps and walkways with colored powder.

Many shop owners will have two pujas, one at home with their family and one at their place of business. Diwali is important for business owners. They want the goddess of wealth and good fortune to bless their business. The owners and employees may ask a Hindu priest to come to their store and perform a puja, asking the goddess to bring them good fortune.

Diwali is the beginning of the new business year. All business books and accounts are closed. Business owners pay any debts. A special symbol is put on the account page to show that one business year is ending and a new year is beginning.

Some Hindus attend special Diwali pujas at Hindu temples. After the puja, Hindu priests talk about following the right path to find happiness in this life and in the next.

When Diwali falls during the week, most families in the United States and Canada wait until jobs and school are over to perform their puja.

When it is time to begin, the family dresses in

Some Hindus attend special Diwali pujas at Hindu temples.

their new clothes and saris. Everyone removes his or her shoes in honor of Lakshmi and gathers near the altar. Incense or an oil lamp is lit near a small image of Lakshmi. The father reads from a book and recites the prayers.

An offering of flowers, fruit, and sweets is placed in front of Lakshmi. After the puja everyone hugs one another. "Happy Diwali" is

Everyone removes his or her shoes in honor of Lakshmi.

repeated to each person. The younger people touch the feet of the grandparents as a sign of respect.

As the sun goes down it is time to light the small lamps. Some families also use strings of small electric lights. They string the lights along the edges of the roof of their homes. Soon flickering light is everywhere. Now it is time to eat. On the table are plates full of delicious

Many families string white lights outside their homes on Diwali.

After the puja, the lights are lit and then it is time to eat delicious food.

Everyone hopes Lakshmi will bring good fortune for the coming year.

Indian food. After the main meal the mother brings out trays filled with sweets and desserts. There is so much food. Family and friends are in a joyous mood. Indian people love to celebrate Diwali. As the lamps burn bright, the wish of everyone is that Lakshmi will bring good fortune to all for the coming year. Happy Diwali!

Glossary

avatar—The birth of a god in human form.

barfi—Candy made from sugar and milk.

Brahma—The creator; part of the Hindu Triad.

Brahman—The one Supreme Being in Hinduism.

ceremony—A set of actions done the same way every time.

chapatis—A pancakelike flat bread.

exile—To send away.

jalebis—A Diwali treat shaped like a pretzel.

kameez—A long, knee-length shirt or dress.

karma—An action or deed.

Krishna—The eighth avatar of Vishnu; a great warrior and hero worshipped by Hindus.

laddoos—Sweet, golden-yellow balls of candy.

Lakshmi—The goddess of wealth who is the wife of Vishnu.

puja—A prayer or worship service.

Rama—The seventh avatar of Vishnu; the hero of the Ramayana.

Ramayana—The story of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu.

rangoli—Designs with rice powder that girls put on doorsteps and entrances on Diwali.

rasgulla—Cheese balls dipped in sugar syrup.

reincarnation—The rebirth of a soul as something or someone else.

roti—Another name for a pancakelike flatbread.

sari—A garment worn by Indian women. It is made by wrapping yards of material around the body.

Shiva—The god of destruction. One of the three gods of the Hindu Triad.

sitar—A tall, long-stringed musical instrument plucked like a guitar.

symbol—Something that stands for a thing or idea.

tablas—A pair of bongolike drums.

Vedas—Four ancient sacred Hindu writings that have stories about creation, prayers, and the right way to live.

Vishnu—The god that preserves. One of the three gods of the Hindu Triad.

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